

Stopping water pollution at its source

Keeping San Diego's beaches and bays safe and clean

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San Diego is more than a beautiful city—it's our home. Our citizens cherish our beaches, bays, rivers, recreational waters; in fact, they value them so highly that in the City's last public opinion poll they rated keeping these waters pollution-free as their highest priority.

In response, Mayor Murphy subsequently designated cleaning up our beaches and bays as goal number four on his administration, and he quantified that goal by setting a 50 percent reduction of beach postings and closures by 2004 as a target.

To reach his goal, Mayor Murphy established the Clean Water Task Force, which assembled scientists, academia, environmental groups, builders, and the community as a forum to develop pollution reduction strategies. The City Manager also elevated the Storm Water Pollution Prevention Program to its own division in the General Services Department, designating it City's lead in water pollution prevention. The City Council doubled its budget to \$3 million for Fiscal Year 2002.

The new Storm Water Pollution Prevention Division focused on five areas: investigation, pollution abatement, education, enforcement, and additional funding.

Investigation: Pollution prevention focused on pollutants that are easily identified, easily eliminated, and inexpensive to address. This phase included testing more than 300 storm drains, gutters, channels, streams and rivers in San Diego, with concentrated efforts in and around Mission Bay. Results revealed that less than 10 percent of beach closures result from sewage contamination. The majority is due to runoff produced by our everyday activities: cleaning, clipping, fertilizing or over-irrigating our yards, applying pesticides, not picking up pet waste, applying pesticides, and driving or maintaining our cars.

Pollution Abatement: Information gathered from our investigational efforts was very productive. Some of the measures taken to reduce bacterial pollution coming from public areas included adjusting sprinkler systems and watering schedules and reengineering recreation vehicle dump stations. We also have become more aggressive in preventing residential and commercial pollution by prohibiting construction site and home remodeling residues, landscape debris, sediment, and restaurant discharges—such as mop water and debris resulting from the hosing down kitchen floor mats outside—from

entering the storm drains. Early investigation and remediation efforts have been significant: we saw a 36 percent reduction in beach postings and closures in 2001 and a 45 percent reduction in 2002.

Since rainfall is largely unpredictable and unpreventable, we factor all rain-related postings—called General Advisories—out of our statistical data. Instead, we focus on and include what we can control: postings that result from urban runoff from our homes and businesses, postings due to high levels of non-sewage bacteria in our waters, and sewage-spill closures. This method allows us to accurately gauge the effectiveness of our program, regardless of rain.

Education: Education is most important of our long-term efforts to reduce water pollution. Many citizens do not realize that their actions—such as ignoring their leaking cars and or performing improper pool maintenance—contribute to the problem. But most people will change their behavior once they learn about pollution prevention.

The City developed the ‘Think Blue’ education, outreach and media campaign to teach residents and corporations about how everyone can reduce storm water pollution. Information has been made available through television and radio announcements, newspaper articles, school and community programs and a web site, www.thinkbluesd.org.

Enforcement: Unfortunately, education is not always enough, and some citizens and businesses choose to disregard safe practices and pollute our beaches, bays and watersheds. To combat the problem, the City developed a Storm Water Code Enforcement Team, which enforces water codes and standards. Violators may be issued citations or civil penalties, and some are fined from \$100 to \$10,000 a day, depending on the caustic nature of the pollutant and the severity of the violation.

We encourage you to report any illegal pollution discharges to our live-operator hotline, (619) 235-1000, during normal business hours or to our 24-hour, seven-day-a-week regional recorded hotline—1-888-THINK-BLue.

Additional Funding: The City currently spends \$29 million annually to keep our recreational waters clean, but it does not provide funds for our most important need: regular cleaning of the storm drain system. Until we are able to identify the financial resources necessary to maintain our storm drains, we will continue to work with other levels of government and environmental groups to fund investigation and abatement activities through grants and subventions.

In conclusion, we all must remember that the storm drain system is at the center of our efforts—citizens must use it properly, and the City must maintain it. We simply don’t have the resources to regularly clean the drains or to construct a new system; therefore,

changing our behaviors becomes that much more important in the battle to clean and protect our recreational waters.

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